

Message Text

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ACTION EA-09

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FOR IEA (WEEKLY HIGHLIGHT)

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PINT, SOPN, SN

SUBJECT: ANOTHER MOVE TO ENSURE FIRM GOVERNMENT CONTROL
OF LOCAL PRESS

THE MINISTER FOR CULTURE, MR JEK YEUN THONG, ANNOUNCED IN
PARLIAMENT TUESDAY THAT "IN ORDER TO BREAK THE MONOPOLISTIC
CONTROL OF MAJOR NEWSPAPERS BY A SMALL GROUP OF PEOPLE", THE
GOVERNMENT PLANS TO PROHIBIT ANY PERSON FROM HOLDING DIRECTLY,
INDIRECTLY, OR IN ANY OTHER MANNER MORE THAN THREE PERCENT OF
THE STOCK OF A NEWSPAPER, UNLESS GIVEN SPECIAL PERMISSION BY
THE GOVERNMENT LICENSING AUTHORITY. INDIVIDUAL HOLDINGS OVER
THREE PERCENT WILL HAVE TO BE SOLD ON THE LOCAL STOCK EXCHANGE.

MINISTER JEK SAID THAT WHILE THE DANGER OF NEWSPAPERS FALLING
INTO THE HANDS OF FOREIGN INTERESTS HAD BEEN LESSENED THANKS
TO THE PRESS ACT WHICH TOOK EFFECT TWO YEARS AGO, THE SITUATION
IS STILL FAR FROM SATISFACTORY BECAUSE OWNERSHIP OF
MAJOR NEWSPAPERS REMAINS WITH A SMALL GROUP OF PEOPLE.

"IN A SMALL COUNTRY LIKE SINGAPORE," HE SAID, "IT IS
UNDESIRABLE TO ALLOW ANY PERSON OR FAMILY TO HAVE A
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MONOPOLISTIC CONTROL OF ANY MAJOR NEWSPAPER." JEK
DECLARED IT WOULD BE "SAFER FOR OWNERSHIP TO BE SPREAD
AS WIDELY AS POSSIBLE."

THIS NEW PROPOSED MOVE COMES AS A SURPRISE IN VIEW
OF THE CONTROLS ALREADY AVAILABLE TO THE GOVERNMENT
(LICENSING, WEIGHTED MANAGEMENT SHARES, AND A VERY

EFFECTIVE SYSTEM OF INFORMAL GUIDANCE) AND THE CURRENTLY DOCILE NATURE OF THE LOCAL PRESS. INITIAL REACTION AND ANALYSIS IS THAT TH GOVERNMENT MEANS TO BREAK UP ONE-FAMILY OWNERSHIP OF THE TWO LEADING CHINESE DAILIES, SIN CHEW JIT POH AND NANYANG SIANG PAU. BOTH AT VARIOUS TIMES IN SINGAPORE'S SHORT HISTORY HAVE BEEN SOURCES OF TROUBLE AND OPPOSITION TO GOVERNMENT POLICY. THE NANYANG IN PARTICULAR IS CONSIDERED A POTENTIAL PROPONENT OF WHAT IS CALLED "CHINESE CHAUVINISM". A FORMER EDITOR, LEE EU SENG, IS NOW IN HIS FOURTH YEAR OF DETENTION AT CHANGI PRISON ON PRECISELY THAT CHARGE. ANOTHER FORMER EDITOR, SHAMSUDDIN TUNG TAO-CHANG, WAS ARRESTED UNDER THE INTERNAL SECURITY ACT JUST AFTER THE POLLS CLOSED IN LAST DECEMBER'S PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION N BEING HELD ON CHARGES OF STIRRING UP CHINESE CHAUVINISM. SO THE GOVERNMENT HAS PROBABLY DECIDED TO TAKE THIS NEW STEP WITH AN EYE TO THE LONG FUTURE, TO AVOID A POTENTIAL PITCHED BATTLE WITH ANY NEWSPAPER WHICH COULD BE A MORE FORMIDABLE ADVERSARY THROUGH CONSOLIDATED OWNERSHIP. WITH OWNERSHIP SCATTERED AMONG MANY PEOPLE INTERESTED PRIMARILY IN THE CONTINUED PROFITABILITY OF THE NEWSPAPERS-- AND THEY ARE VERY PROFITABLE-- A POTENTIAL ADVERSARY OR SOURCE OF COMMUNAL TROUBLE WOULD BE ALL THE MORE EFFECTIVELY DISARMED. THERE IS NO INDICATION HOW SOON THE GOVERNMENT,AND TO WHICH AFFECT, AND HOW MUCH TIME WOULD BE ALLOWED FOR DIVESTITURE OF HOLDINGS ABOVE THE THREE PERCENT UNCLASSIFIED

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LIMIT. SOME MILD DEBATE MAY BE EXPECTED IN PARLIAMENT-- BUT ONLY MILD. IN THE ONLY PUBLIC REACTION SO FAR, THURSDAY'S STRAITS TIMES EDITORIALIZED THAT THE RATIONALE FOR THE GOVERNMENT'S PROPOSED LEGISLATION "APPEARS CLEAR AND CONVINCING, THOUGH IT MAY BE QUESTIONED ABROAD AS YET ANOTHER STEP IN THE DIRECTION OF INCREASING AUTHORITARIANISM". AND YET, THE EDITORIAL WENT ON, "ONE MAY ASK WHETHER OR NOT THE GOVERNMENT IS ERRING TOO MUCH ON THE SIDE OF CAUTION, AS THERE ARE ALREADY A NUMBER OF EFFECTIVE CHECKS IN EXISTING LAWS TO ENSURE THAT THE NEWS MEDIA DOES NOT GO ASTRAY." ENDING ON A LUKEWARM NOTE, THE STRAITS TIMES CONCLUDED THAT "THERE ARE ENOUGH SAFEGUARDS AS IT IS, BUT THE PROPOSALS OUTLINED IN PARLIAMENT CAN BE SUPPORTED ON THE GROUND THAT IT IS INTRINSICALLY UNDESIRABLE TO ALLOW A PERSON OR FAMILY COMPLETE CONTROL IN RUNNING A LARGE NATIONAL NEWSPAPER." STRYKER

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